



# THE VALUE OF THE FOUR SEASONS' MOTIF IN THE ART OF NGUYEN DYNASTY, APPLICATION IN RECENT TRAINING AND HERITAGE CONSERVATION IN VIETNAM

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## ABSTRACT

Art under the time of Nguyen Dynasty (1802 - 1945) had gone through a long history and formed typical artistic values of royal architecture in the land of Thua Thien Hue province – Vietnam, demonstrating distinctive and unique aesthetic values in terms of history, culture and art. The study of art under the time of Nguyen Dynasty in general and the decorative art using four seasons' motif in particular are those of the issues that need to be paid attention to in the conservation of cultural heritage. This is also the basis and the foundation for effective learning, teaching and creative activities at current Vietnamese Universities of Art.

**KEYWORDS:** Art under the time of Nguyen Dynasty, four seasons' motif, training, preservation, heritage.

### 1. The artistic value of four seasons' motif in the art of Nguyen Dynasty.

Talking about the visual arts under the time of Nguyen Dynasty, it is impossible not to mention the decorative art using the four seasons' motif, one of the outstanding achievements of the royal artistic heritage of Nguyen Dynasty. Within an impressive complex of monuments that reflects quite clearly the artistic appearance of an era, the decorative art in general and the set of decorative themes of four seasons have become one of the most important aesthetic elements and attributes imbued with the royal artistic style of Nguyen Dynasty. The set of four seasons' motif is a visually-demonstrated aspect of content that attracts high interest and is one of the exceptional decorative visual values that contain profound humanistic implications imbued with Oriental philosophy and illustrate the creative talents of Vietnamese artisans in the past. With traditional folk decoration techniques that have been enhanced through the discovery and creativity of talented artisans from all over the country, the motif has contributed to creating powerful and long lasting aesthetic-cultural values and qualities of the royal art of the Nguyen Dynasty.

In the existence, formation and self-expression of the four seasons' decoration motif, most of the layouts are governed by architectural space to a certain extent. Within such regulation, the artisans of Nguyen Dynasty created remarkable formats of four seasons decoration, one of which is "nhát thi nhát hoa" (one poem accompanied by one painting) that are shown mainly on the elongated roof ledges, on "co diem" (the large space between the two layers of roofs) – a very familiar architectural structure under the time of Nguyen Dynasty, on the "borders" of embossed masonry, porcelain mosaics or fresco paintings on three-arched-entrances gates. Observing the collected materials with the format of "nhát thi nhát hoa" together with the remaining relics and artifacts, it can be seen that the layout and format of "nhát thi nhát hoa" hold an important position in the royal architectural decoration of Nguyen Dynasty. The four seasons' decorations on the large space between the two layers of roofs are quite close to the visionary style using various materials such as wood carvings, enameled bronze, masonry and fresco paintings. It is clearly shown on the boxes of different sizes and shapes of Mieu Mon (The Mieu - Hien Lam Cac Pavilion of the Glorious Coming), on the dividing roof ledges of Hung Mieu, on the porcelain mosaics decorated with "bat buu" (the eight weapons), on the mural paintings of clouds inlaid with five-color porcelain in Thai Hoa Palace, on the embossed mosaics of colored porcelain and sepi stucco background on the curtain wall in Truong Sanh Palace, decorative bands using four seasons' motif at Duyet Thi Duong, Sung An palace (Minh Mang Tomb), wood carvings at Thieu Tri Tomb stele house... The content of the four seasons' decorative layouts is also interwoven with the boxes of natural sceneries. Such unique variations not only appear on the surface of the structure but also accommodate inner expressiveness of art. For that reason, the layout of "nhát thi nhát hoa" is considered as one of the most successful and outstanding visual layouts in the decorative art of Nguyen Dynasty. Regarding the porcelain mosaics, thanks to the luster, hardness, and certain thickness of the material, when specifically shaping the objects of "bat buu" (the eight weapons), interspersed with the enameled-bronze poems or with the Chinese characters on a flat background, a rather fancy layout was created. The format of "nhát thi nhát hoa" is the most traditional in the ancient art of Vietnam, and it has become a strong point in Vietnamese decoration that has achieved undeniably high aesthetic effects. The format of "nhát thi nhát hoa" illustrating four seasons' motif is determined to be suitable for only a certain sections in the architectural works of art.

The reason is that this layout requires repetition, which can be feasible only in decorative strips and lines. Therefore, the most favorable position for this layout is in the space between the two layers of roofs, the continuing boxes on roof ledges, and the small connecting boxes on the curtain walls. On that account, it is quite obvious that the visual formats and meanings of the four seasons' motif have been highly generalized and created sustainable spiritual-aesthetic values that have existed for thousands of years in the Orient. In the article entitled: *"Hue, the uniqueness of Nguyen Dynasty's fine art"*, Tran Lam Bien evaluated and analyzed the layouts of the boxes: "... it was not until the 19th century that the phenomenon of box and cell division reached its peak, both in terms of art and in popularity. It is typical of Hue's decoration... the boxes on Hue's brick doors can be considered to have achieved a very high aesthetic effect!" The decorative principles using four seasons' motif on the royal court works are not always strictly followed, the liberal, flighty and attractive features are also presenting in many architectural positions that create their own unique aesthetic effects in the art of Nguyen Dynasty.

The four seasons' motif possesses profound and substantial values because in addition to their symbolic meaning of Spring, the images of flowers in the four seasons' motif such as yellow apricot blossom, peach blossom, chrysanthemum, lotus... gently have entered the visual arts as symbols of elegant amusements. Yellow apricot blossom is representing in architectural decoration projects, which not only serves the decorative and beautifying purposes but also is deeply engraved in each and every grain of wood with the feelings, the sentimentality and natural beauties from the artists' minds, bringing with them the whole system of ideology and philosophical ideas within the decorative patterns. The yellow apricot blossom is the symbol of gentlemen, the elegant beauty of the soul. The way the yellow apricot tree transformed aligns with the symbolic conventions of morality and traditional conceptions of life: the yellow apricot or the peach branch is transformed into a phoenix (the yellow apricot tree turning into qilin)... Such seem-to-be unintentional, but in fact very intentional, carvings are, first of all, liberality in creativity. Furthermore, the variation is created with the combination of plants and mythical powerful animals from the ancient concept, the Chinese have considered yellow apricot tree as a precious medicine that can prevent and fight evil demons. In Vietnam, yellow apricot tree also stands for the virtue of youthful women, the embodiment of feminine beauty that is both fragile and delicate. Yellow apricot tree is also associated with many other symbols to promote the idea of beauties and virtues: apricot trees and birds (mai diu); apricot trees and flamingos (mai hac) or with a white stork. The delicate and diligent body of the stork in harmony with the gentle and pure yellow apricot tree has constructed such an elegant beauty that it is frequently illustrated in architectural decorations. The yellow apricot format in architectural decoration is varied, but in general, it is praising the beauty of human virtues, associated with the image of a graceful and noble woman. The image of yellow apricot blossoms is designed into lively shapes found in various architectural positions. The blossoms are charming; the five lovely round petals bloom in five different directions but are still centered with the pistil of featherlike tassels and some light spots, which create such a gentle impression. The yellow apricot blossoms are similar to peach blossoms with a beautiful five-petal form, but the difference shown in yellow apricot blossoms is that they can adapt even to the most intense sunlight. It is the harsh rays of the sun that make the yellow apricot blooming, and as gold is tested by fire, the flowers become brighter, more glory and more splendid. Capturing the divine will from

the inherent nature, the ancients let the yellow apricot blossoms reveal its temperament most vividly through each and every visual element: the lines are sharp but still light, the yellow apricot blossoms are small in size and the process does not require any coloring but thanks to the high and low carving layers and the roughness changing in a fascinating way, the light on the petals and shades on decorative carvings on those architecture works are magically created. The wooden and stone details appearing with the carvings of yellow apricot blossoms using four seasons' motif in the art of Nguyen Dynasty are typical features of the Nguyen art style. From decorative architectural carvings to decorative carvings and reliefs in private houses, or even on other objects and sacrifices, people can still observe the yellow apricot blossoms with a profound beauty of the Oriental women. On plates carved from different materials, caskets, chests, table and chair legs, roof stacks, precious objects in Hue's royal court, besides other decorative flowers and motifs, the yellow apricot blossom of the four seasons' motif still plays a significant role. In particular, on the remaining nine Dynastic urns in Hue to this day, there are five-petal apricot blossom patterns, but the leaves and the branches are stylized in a very interesting way, that is: the tree trunk is branched to form the waves, the leaves seem like gliding on the water surface but in two separate directions and the thing that connects the two branches of apricot trees is the wave foam. Two bunches of apricot trees aligning on the two sides has created a balance in a very natural appearance, making the image of the yellow apricot trees even more vibrant. With the same yellow apricot trees, but those on the four seasons' boxes at Trieu Mieu are transformed and formalized into the shape of a reindeer. Just like the yellow apricots, peach blossoms appear in almost every art formats, from small patterns to more complex ones. The yellow apricots are not standing alone, but always accompanied by other symbols to increase the aesthetic qualities of the plants and naturally bring along the prosperity and a peaceful spirit that are deposited in the creative souls of the artists. Starting from the large and strong root, the peach tree is filled with big-petal blossoms, then the trunk shrinks a bit, and suddenly rises up in a diagonal direction, a peach branch then splits and extends softly and parallel with the ground. The artisans have skillfully reflected the reality to every detail, invigorating the meaning of longevity, good fortune and prosperity - symbolizing the wish of the country to be prosperous and full of vitality...

Throughout the history of traditional Vietnamese art, Vietnamese people are familiar with lotus and chrysanthemums as religious symbols, and tend to explore the gentle and pure beauty of the highly symbolic flowers existing in the four seasons' motif of ancient Vietnamese art. Particularly, the fact that chrysanthemums and other climbing flowers appear regularly in the decorations using the four seasons' motif in the architecture of the Nguyen Dynasty deserves to be studied more carefully with explanations from multiple perspectives such as history, society, psychology and aesthetics. Notably, the motif in which flowers and plants turning into dragons has made the four seasons' motif of Nguyen Dynasty's royal art richer in style and aesthetic value.

The pine trees and bamboo are motifs bearing the qualities of the gentleman. In which, bamboo symbolizes immortality that is used quite frequently in architectural decorations. Influenced by ancient Chinese art, the models of pine tree, bamboo and the deer represent longevity (pine tree) and abundant fortune (deer). Pine trees and bamboo are also demonstrating bravery and forever-greenness. The green foliage that always withstands the rain and sun is also a symbolic image containing many meanings. In the variation of decorative styles, the pine tree also stands for the proud virtue, and when attached to the symbol of the white crane, it increases the meaning of endurance and diligence, just like the Vietnamese mettle. The pine trees and the bamboo have been introduced into the decorative and sculptural arts by the artists mainly through the reliefs with rich carving techniques and have demonstrated the beauty of pine tree symbol that has imprinted in the subconscious mind of the artists. At a more sophisticated level, pine tree is formalized in many decorative formats of its branches turning into dragons, or by the skillful hands of the artisans, bamboo are bent into dragons: still on the foundation of a lively tortuous bamboo trunk, the branches spread evenly around, the upper buds are soft, slightly curved downwards, and the roots are cleverly shaped into a dragon's head with a powerful body. The carving of a dragon's head is protruding from the tree trunk, with a steady posture, the dragon looks like it is spitting out pearls, and the foliage looks like tiny hands spreading out layer by layer, creating a dynamic element. The foliage on the top of the tree is thinner, and becomes thicker towards the lower ends of the tree trunk and the root; this creates conditions for the image of the dragon's head to be clearer and more standout. In such evolution, pine trees and bamboo can be seen combined with types of birds, sometimes with a kind of fruit (litchi) or peach, squash, this has become very classic in decoration. With the skillful hands of the artisans, the pine trees and bamboo are elaborately and delicately described and expressed in many stylized and modified forms, the plants and the animals seem to be embodiments of an inseparable union. On the royal embroidery paintings of Nguyen Dynasty, on the paintings of the countryside on ancient blue ceramics and even on the enameled-bronze housewares and sacrifices are the painted drawings of four seasons with very elegant and sophisticated lines. With the same motif of pine trees, bamboo, crane and deer, but the alteration fitted for different decorative position has created an openness in the combination of birds and flowers in the four seasons' art of the Nguyen Dynasty. Through a wide range of decorative formats using flowers and "tu quy" (four favorite patterns) in the art of Nguyen Dynasty, we can see a diversity of layers of cultural meanings. Inheriting botanical motifs of previous periods such as lotus and chrysanthemum flowers

from Ly - Tran Dynasties, the enhancement in terms of meanings expressed through the graphic details, the four seasons' motif, the stylized forms, and the emphasis on certain elements have partly spoken for the aesthetic ideas of the Emperors during the time of Nguyen Dynasty.

The four seasons' motif also appear on couplets, on architectural parts and many other details, in which chrysanthemum is the embodiment of rarity. In autumn, chrysanthemums bloom that symbolizes both luxury and abundance of vitality. The world of plants is transformed according to the rich imagination. Chrysanthemum is included in the *four seasons' motif* as well as frequently conveyed in the *four favorite patterns* of: yellow apricot blossoms, orchids, chrysanthemums, and bamboo. Combining delicate lines with flexible carvings, the ancient artisans input the quintessence into the rustic and at the same time enhanced the power of the chrysanthemum in the four seasons' motif on the three-arched-entrances gates at Minh Mang Tomb, Thieu Tri Tomb. The prominent decorative points in the architectural works are the ends of the rooftops or of the triangular roofs that are stylized patterns of climbing flowers with certain rules. On the contours of ancient roofs in Hue, simple decorations of climbing flowers are repeated. Or on some decorative details using filigreeing technique on wooden doors, there is a stylization with strings of flowers and leaves intertwined into very vivid twists together with the central pattern of a stylized chrysanthemum with a round pistil and petals spreading around, creating the harmony. Whether in a vertical or horizontal layouts, chrysanthemums are always expressed with elegance and charm, but also with lightness. To decorate the boxes of four seasons' at the tombs such as Gia Long Tomb, Minh Mang Tomb, Thieu Tri Tomb, Tu Duc Tomb, the shrine at An Lang, Vo Mieu and the porcelain mosaics at the shrine of Khai Dinh Tomb, the artisans at that time used many interlocking motifs, simulating the beauty of chrysanthemums and apricots with a variety of expressions. This proves that the aesthetic ideas of Nguyen Dynasty were quite lively and rich. It can be said that, in the four seasons' motif, the natural symbols are never changed; only its symbolic meaning layers are transformed corresponding to the visual innovations to suit the creative intentions of the artisans of Nguyen Dynasty. After nearly 150 years of existence, Nguyen Dynasty left behind a magnificent treasure of material and spiritual culture. Contributing to that treasure of cultural heritage is indeed the four seasons' decoration motif in the Nguyen Dynasty relic complex in Thua Thien Hue province - Vietnam.

## 2. Application in recent training and heritage conservation in Vietnam:

### \* Application in training:

Applying research results of four seasons' decorative motif in teaching at fine arts schools is one of the practical goals of this paper. The results of the study on four seasons' decorative motif also show the feasibility of applying them to teaching subjects of art theory and design practice to students. The actual results of the papers, when being applied in teaching, will contribute to promoting students' ability to acquire knowledge. In the visual arts textbooks of Nguyen Dynasty, the four seasons' decorative motif has yet to be properly mentioned, so it is necessary to further the information and knowledge about such decorative arts in the curriculum and lectures so as to organize in-depth seminars on this topic, contributing to educating students to better understand the values of Hue cultural heritage as said by Mr. A. M. Mbow (Former General Director of UNESCO) when he visited Hue - Vietnam in 1981: *The symbolic structure of different spaces makes Hue a city of wonderful harmony. Hue realizes the synthesis of religion and life in architecture*. Teaching activities in universities are generally a process consisting of two dialectically unifying activities: teaching activities of lecturers and learning activities of students. For teaching art, in addition to following the general norms, specific attributes need to be paid special attention to. In the process of instructing students to record ancient art features and explore the four seasons' decorative motif in Nguyen Dynasty relics, it is very important for the teachers to fulfill their professional responsibilities and conduct good lecturers' organization and management which will have a more positive impact on the students. Applying the four seasons' decorative motif in teaching requires an implementation method that is suitable with the practice, for subjects of both theoretical and practical. The application of such patterns must be very strict and scientific in terms of visualization and accuracy with a flexible cognitive method. The theme and the format of four seasons' motif with its outstanding and selective aesthetic forms and pattern structure, together with profound meanings of each motif have had impacts and relevance to many contents of the lectures. However, it should be noted that the density and level of such general knowledge in the lectures can vary, so the application in the lectures also needs to be scientifically related to other lectures according to the course progress. Because these contents are proof of the acculturation of the Vietnamese in the historical process up to the Nguyen Dynasty. Through the language of decorative visuality, there are a number of typical works of four seasons' motif that possess deep Oriental characteristics and imbued with Vietnameseization to suit the national cultural tradition. In lectures, it is always necessary to analyze the works in terms of materials and decorative styles of Nguyen Dynasty's royal architecture. The application of theory and practice in the field of recording ancient art features that connects ancient folk and royal fine art works in Hue has had a profound impact on the process of students' knowledge reception and forming their creative thinking. Most of the materials in the Nguyen Dynasty's fine arts are decorated with the four seasons' motif such as mural paintings, art of enameled bronze, stone carvings, wood carvings, pottery, embossed masonry... This can help students understand that each decorative motif is a stylized art that possesses a strong artistic philosophy within itself. It is indeed a special form reflecting the actual social philo-

sophic consciousness.

Practical research helps students to be self-disciplined and be more active in their learning activities at the relics. In that process, the lecturers' teaching activities about theory of art under the time of Nguyen Dynasty plays a key role in positively influencing students' research activities, making them enthusiastic and active in their research and creative activities, resulting from their own discovery of decorative motifs and ancient art patterns, in which the four seasons' motif is a visual aesthetic object that is always presenting in the visual senses of each student. In addition to the common characteristics of university students, fine arts students also have specificities in their psychological characteristics and professional learning, so in addition to the general management requirements, it is also necessary to have flexibility in teaching and training methods to create the best conditions for fine art students to study. The learning and interactive activities of the lectures are those of the contents that contribute to improving learning efficiency and promoting the quality of learning and improving art knowledge for students.

The research results on the topic of four seasons' decorative motif have been applied to teaching and learning at the Universities of Fine Arts in Vietnam in general and at the University of the Arts, Hue University in particular. The adequate research results of this topic in both theory and images can be a reference for art researchers. Therefore, applying the results of research on four seasons' motif to ancient art patterns recording is very suitable for subjects in fine arts universities, especially with the learning requirements of first-year students: The method of studying by recording ancient art patterns includes a number of requirements of research on relics, direct access to ancient artifacts and works in order to collect accurate information and documents about selected images. In common usage there are also the terms fieldwork and research survey. In the process of ancient art patterns recording, students not only draw ordinary sketches, but also have to take field measurements, print, take notes, draw the site plan of the monument, take photos, etc., to describe the monument and the items with research depth. The work of recording on ancient art patterns provides learners with basic research skills such as information gathering and processing, reporting on site visits, and direct fieldwork. The method of collecting information, images, original documents, documents from the Internet, books, documents, reports on the synthesis and the processing of the sources in the ancient art patterns recording should have the origins of the documents, the dates, time, year, month, event of images are also required... This process aims to promote the autonomy, creativity and the dynamism of the students under the guidance of the lecturers to help students initially get acquainted with scientific research in association with real life art. Students know how to find, read and process documents by themselves, arranging ideas into a text with specific artistic characteristics to demonstrate a problem posed in real life of learning and creativity. Through the process of recording ancient art patterns, students are able to improve their artistic theory and know how to apply research results into practice, applying the learned knowledge and skills to analyze and to solve a particular problem in the field of fine arts. It is ensured to reflect the learned knowledge and professional competence of students. Surveying and studying ancient art works in general and four seasons' motif in particular is the process of discovering aesthetic values that have been formed and existed in the historical process and newly identified values that can gradually replace the old ones which are no longer relevant.

#### \* Heritage conservation.

Nowadays, the values of the royal artistic and architectural complex of the Nguyen Dynasty have become a part of the world cultural heritage, when folk culture is in great demand for decoration in all aspects, the royalization in four seasons' motif is becoming more diverse in many aspects. Those decorative works, as assessed by Nguyen Huu Thong: *The decorative motifs are both refined and simple. Being refined as it is keeping the cores of animals and the nature; and being simple as it is open, concise, without any frills and complications*<sup>9</sup>. The process of deeply exploring the four seasons' decorative motif will acquire new values for the visual arts that can be in line with the needs of preserving and promoting traditional artistic values in today's artistic life. It also sets higher conservation requirements in order to promote the preeminent attributes of traditional art in contemporary aesthetic life. Prof. Dr. Nakagawa Takeshi of Waseda University (Japan) raised the practical difficulties of conservation and suggested: "... it is necessary to use both the knowledge of the living artisans and pay high attention to the current status of the work. In addition, we should refer to the works of China and other countries..."<sup>4</sup>. In contemporary aesthetic life, just like the demand for restoration of the royal architectural works of the Nguyen Dynasty as world cultural heritage, there is a rather high practical demand, especially for the worshipping works that contains profound spirituality and respect for ancestors. From the above thoughts, it is necessary to implement the following solutions:

Implementing an overall and comprehensive investigation and survey of architectural works with four seasons' motif that are currently remaining in palaces and tombs. Determining the age of the works, whether it is original or restored, year of restoration, the group of craftsmen and artisans, master craftsmen who were in charge of the restoration. From there, determining measures for reparation and strengthening to preserve precious original decorations, taking measures to protect works and items that are in danger of being destroyed, creating specific records for better management and to act as the foundation for the authorities to research, preserve and promote their

values.

It is necessary to preserve and take photos of current originals to preserve images of original decorative works of four seasons' motif, such as color photography, drawing, color reproduction, video recording. In particular, special attention must be paid to rare and precious decorative works, to the themes, forms of expression and techniques that possesses distinctive visual imprints of the four seasons' motif.

For artisans, it is necessary to have policies to encourage artisans and artisans' guilds to maintain and develop their profession, to create specific conditions for artisans and master craftsmen to transfer their professions such as financial support, tools and materials, restoration assignment... Especially, encouraging young people to learn the profession, this can help them not only have jobs but also enhance their skills, techniques and knowledge. For the master artisans of the famous craftsman guilds, it is necessary to have a specific plan to receive folk experiences in order to preserve and pass on the values of this art to the next generations. On the other hand, it is necessary to summarize and synthesize such knowledge to help researchers with more materials, to promote the decorative values in contemporary art life. This is a task that is urgently required and needs great efforts of those responsible for research, conservation and promotion of national artistic values.

Improving the quality of artisans and craftsmen's skills is one of the contents associated with the preservation and promotion of cultural values of craft villages, including craft villages specializing in restoring of ancient cultural and historical relics, or those specializing in the production of handicrafts and souvenir products. Research and application in conservation is, first of all, creating conditions to improve the skills of artisans in composing, collecting and restoring the four seasons' decorative patterns that are still preserved in folklore on sophisticated products. Preserving the four seasons' motif in local cultural heritages to put them into use for culture and tourism. At the same time, encouraging the connection between artisans and vocational schools, to provide vocational training for young people, to restore traditional production techniques, and to preserve the identity of the craft villages.

Organizing vocational training in mosaic, masonry, wood carving, stone carving, bronze casting..., in the traditional way, through which learners can grasp the techniques of visual decoration in general and decoration using four seasons' motif in particular on all products and materials. This is one of the methods of on-the-job training, which brings high efficiency and contains cultural elements of the craft villages, in which the artisans transmit the craftsmanship to the trainees mainly based on their work and life experience. Organizing short-term on-site vocational training courses to equip learners with sufficient professional knowledge, skills and attitudes to perform some product samples. In the trend of international integration, in addition to training skills for the labor force, it is necessary to train tourism skills for the local workforce, in order to promote the strengths of the locality that can generate the optimal source of income from tourism activities.

Applying the results of research on the four seasons' motif in conservation and promotion of values as mentioned above have shown that the research topics on the Nguyen Dynasty in general have been very interested and favored by researchers because of the system of artistic values it contains which needs to be discovered and preserved. The above research works are considered as very useful references for those who are interested in traditional Vietnamese art in general and the decorative arts of the Vietnamese people in particular. Their scientific meaning is expressed through the study of a real issue with many novelties and the research results can be feasibly applied in contemporary art life such as research, conservation and promotion of traditional cultural and artistic values as well as serving many different fields of current national culture.

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